

# Business Plan Competition

Chippewa Falls Main Street announced an innovative program in November 1994, to recruit new businesses and to help existing businesses expand in the historic downtown. This program offered a \$5,000 grant and a \$20,000 low-interest loan as the prize for the best business plan submitted by April 1, 1995.

A local banker suggested the program. Each of the five financial institutions in downtown Chippewa Falls contributed \$1,000 toward the grant and \$4,000 toward the loan, which was made available at 75% of the prime rate for five years. Main Street printed and distributed brochures in 1,000 Main Street newsletters, at banks, and at four local colleges. It also mailed brochures to 350 businesses within a 60-mile radius of Chippewa Falls that were on the Main Street Economic Restructuring Committee's business "wish list." Interested participants received a packet that included information on writing a business plan; local agencies that could provide assistance; downtown Chippewa Falls market data; and the latest listing of space available for sale or rent. A local accounting firm also enclosed a letter offering a free review of the business plan.

All new businesses or existing businesses that were considering a major expansion in product line, location, or job creation were eligible for the grant.

While service businesses were eligible to apply, retail businesses that filled a need or niche in downtown Chippewa Falls scored higher in the judging. Six judges were recruited from an area industry, the technical college, an accounting firm, the economic development corporation, the private sector, and a downtown business.

Six individuals had an opportunity to meet with Department of Development business specialist Mike Malcheski on his visits to Chippewa Falls. Four applicants met the April 1 deadline. Three of them opened prior to submitting an application, and the other opened soon after the deadline. The winning business plan was submitted by Computer Systems Services, owned by Dan Dahl, which was located in the basement of an apartment building one-mile from downtown. His business focused mainly on servicing computers and selling computer components. Dan's new downtown location allowed him to expand his retail sales to include computer hardware and software. His grand opening was held June 5, 1995. Computer Systems Services filled a downtown building that had been vacant for two years.

All 47 people who requested information packets were surveyed on why they did not submit an entry. Reasons varied from "too much work" to "a lack of capital." Four indicated they were still planning to open a business in the future. The five financial institutions planned to meet in the fall to review the surveys and discuss funding for the 1996 program.

For more information, call the Wisconsin Main Street Program at (608) 266-7531.

